

Symbolizing atheism and humanism

Having a symbol is useful for a worldview. Muslims have the star and crescent, Jews have the Star of David, and Christians have the cross. So what symbol do atheists and humanists have?

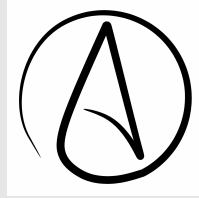
For a long time nothing represented atheism or humanism as global movements. That's partly because consensus on *anything*, especially something like a shared symbol, is hard to come by among freethinkers, for reasons contained in that very word. Before nontheists even get close to arguing over various designs, we'll generally spend a year or two arguing whether we should even *have* a symbol — which is why no one has to worry too much about atheists taking over the world.

In 1965, with the international Humanist movement taking off in a big way, the British Humanist Association hosted a competition to create a symbol. (They like the capital H on Humanism, so I'll do that here.) The winning entry (see the following figure), submitted by London artist Dennis Barrington, was a letter "H" with a large black dot above the crossbar, like the head of a person with arms raised. Clever and concise, it's been the go-to symbol of humanism, and Humanism, ever since.



Atheism also gained a couple of symbols in recent years. A contest in 2008 resulted in a protracted debate over whether there should even *be* a symbol; then some good jokes (my favorite suggested we just adopt the @ sign,

so every e-mail would identify the sender as an atheist); and finally some nice, thoughtful entries.



The winner, designed by Michigan graphic artist and retired schoolteacher Diane Reed, has a bit of a Star Trek vibe — not a negative with this crowd — with a sharp letter "A" wrapped in a circle representing the natural universe. Attractive, positive, and jewelry-friendly.



Perhaps my favorite for sheer cleverness is the symbol for the "Out Campaign," an effort by the Richard Dawkins Foundation to encourage atheists to help improve the public image of atheism by coming out of the closet. Displaying the symbol itself on clothing or jewelry or in social media and explaining what it means when asked has become one low-key way to come out. The symbol is an italic capital "A" in scarlet red (offered here in black to save you a few bucks — you're welcome). It's a clever reference to the letter "A" worn by Hester Prynne in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* to mark her as an adulteress, but now worn by atheists as an unashamed symbol of an unfairly maligned worldview.